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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 002216

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/FO, AF/W, IO/HR, DRL/IRG, AF/RSA, INR/AA;

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL UNGA PHUM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA NOT LIKELY TO BE HELPFUL ON DEFAMATION OF RELIGIONS RESOLUTION

REF: STATE 122629

Classified By: Political Counselor James P. McAnulty  
for reasons in Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) On December 4, PolOff delivered reftel points to Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) International Organizations Ambassador M. K. Ibrahim via telephone December 4 due to his impending travel. As follow up, Embassy also forwarded a white paper via e-mail to him.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Ibrahim prefaced his response by noting that both freedoms of speech and of religion represented important parts of Nigeria's Constitution. He added, however, that "Nigeria is a young country that needs more time to develop the ability to recognize the rights of all religions while not disrespecting any one." In the recent past, he asserted, many crises arose from religious misunderstandings in Nigeria, leading to loss of life. Ibrahim opined that "Nigeria will be among the last countries to accept freedom of expression about religion," when viewed in the context of "the reality of Nigeria's level of diversity, development, education, and tolerance." He lamented that this issue did not involve an easy one, as it is "rooted in religious misunderstanding," asserting that "this is a highly sensitive issue." He described the western ideal of freedom of speech about religion as a "mirage," which, he claimed, will not come to Nigeria in his lifetime.

¶3. (C) Ibrahim expressed hope that, in the future, what he characterized as "fringe" issues, like defamation of religion, would not be placed before members for a vote. Ibrahim asserted that only core human rights issues, such as loss of life, human trafficking, equal access to education, and so forth, should be discussed, and only in Geneva, not at the UN General Assembly. Ambassador Ibrahim acknowledged that "this is not an Africa position, as the nations are diverse and in different stages of development." He did not frame Nigeria's position as the position of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), but specific to Nigeria.

¶4. (C) Ibrahim would not confirm that any representative from Abuja would travel to the UN for this vote, but implied the issue will be managed by Nigeria's UN delegation already in New York.

SANDERS